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ABSTRACT

A constructivist practitioner's masters program in professional development (PDMA) was designed and piloted at the University of Northern Iowa. The program provides an option for pursuing a master's in education structured upon the following constructivism-focused framework of components: (1) the program is designed for experienced educators, and all coursework is applicable to the classroom; (2) classrooms serve as field-based learning laboratories; (3) students progress through the program in cohort groups; (4) professors collaborate in teaching teams to deliver an articulated curriculum; (5) electives, seminars, and practice foster individualization within a community of learners; (6) exit outcomes reflect the linkage of theory to practice; (7) three strands are conducted within a context of inquiry and reflection, initiated early in the program--talent development, managing/monitoring student learning, and community; (8) time commitments are pre-established to assist in planning; and (9) inquiry, reflection, and authentic assessment are crucial. A statewide survey was conducted among a random sample of urban, suburban, and rural schools; 100 surveys (59 percent) were returned. The study resulted in several observations related to master's study for educators. Among these observations were: the overriding goal must be to shape the knowledge base applied in practice; theoretical constructs taught must be modeled and proactively connected to classroom practice; degree programs are needed that are accessible and affordable for teachers in the initial years of their careers. Because master's study shapes expectations for personal processes of continuous professional development, it is crucial to systemic change at the school or district level. Eight data tables are included. (Contains 20 references.) (ND)

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ED 393 829

# WHAT EDUCATORS WANT IN A MASTER'S PROGRAM: A PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVE

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Master's degree programs have been time-honored symbols of professional growth since the first master's degree in education was conferred at Harvard College around 1871 (Glazer, 1986, p. 45). Since that time, with the exception of a slight dip in the early 1980's (Golladay, cited in Glazer, 1986), increasing numbers of students have earned master's degrees in education in the U.S.A. This trend continues today: the number of master's degrees conferred in education by United States colleges and universities increased 25% between 1989 and 1993 alone (Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, September 1, 1995), quite possibly in response to national renewed interest in the professional development of educators (Association of Teacher Educators, 1991; Carnegie Forum, 1986; Holmes Group, 1986, 1990; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1994; Renaissance Group, 1989).

The national increase of master's degrees granted in education is not attributable solely to more graduates from pre-existing traditional master's degree programs but to a proliferation in the number of programmatic options available. Components within degree programs have begun to reflect greater diversity, as demonstrated by degree programs tailored to the context of individual schools or cohorts (Burnaford & Hobson, 1995; Sockett, 1994) exit outcomes no longer limited to master's theses (Nagel, 1994), and constructivist approaches to curricular design (Rainer & Guyton, 1995).

In most states, advanced coursework is considered to be an indicator of the process of professional growth and it is required for the issuance and maintenance of licensure subsequent to initial or probationary teacher certification. This is the case in Iowa.

However, fewer than 40% of Iowa's teachers hold master's degrees and, as a result, Iowa ranks 41st in the United States for percentage of teachers holding an advanced degree (Stilwill, 1995) despite a tradition of educational excellence in the state's PreK-12 schools, colleges, and universities. Existing programs appear to be meeting the needs of a minority of Iowa's educators, but what about the other 60+%?

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the constructivist practitioner's master's program in professional development (PDMA) designed and piloted at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) and present results of a statewide study of practicing teachers with and without master's degrees designed to explore factors influencing teacher decisions when debating whether or not to pursue a master's degree and what components are perceived to be important in degree program design.

## A Practitioners' Master's Degree

The interdepartmental/practitioner design team that assembled the program began work in May of 1994. Members chose to make it as inclusive as possible rather than limiting participation to teachers from certain grade levels or curricular areas and found a supporting framework in the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS, 1994) which outline what all teachers should know and be able to do. (Although students completing the master's program will have skills and knowledge that may prove helpful in preparing for the National Board examinations, taking the examinations is not a requirement of the master's program.) The strength of the standards

as applied to this master's degree is that they are used prescriptively to provide a focus for program content.

Three strands of talent development, managing/monitoring student learning, and learning communities take place within a context of inquiry and reflection that allows learners to internalize information as they process it through application of new skills and knowledge (Joyce, Bennett, and Rolheiser-Bennett, 1990), building upon the five Grennon-Brooks and Brooks (1993) constructivist principles: 1) seek and value students' points of view, 2) structure learning around primary concepts in quest of essence, 3) pose problems of emerging relevance to students, 4) adapt curriculum to address students' suppositions, and 5) assess student learning in the context of teaching. The two framing components of research and reflection are the thread of inquiry which weaves throughout the strands and facilitates a contextual, constructivist process of transferring theory to practice.

The resulting program is unique in that it provides an option for pursuing a master's in education structured upon the following constructivism-focused framework of components:

1. The program is designed for experienced educators; all coursework is applicable to the classroom. The practitioners' master's program is one component of a seamless continuum of professional development that begins with pre-service experiences, continues through induction, and encompasses degreed and non-degreed post-baccalaureate study during the years of in-service teaching. A minimum of two years' experience is required. Transfer of theory to practice is proactively facilitated via a constructivist approach.

2. Classrooms serve as field-based learning laboratories. Connection of theory to practice is emphasized through contextual classroom application, therefore continuous employment in teaching is a central program element.

3. Students progress through the program in cohort groups. Students progress through degree programs in cohort groups of approximately 25 students, of homogeneous grade levels and content areas, from one school district or a limited number of districts.

4. Professors collaborate in teaching teams to deliver an articulated curriculum. Each cohort group works with a teaching team of UNI graduate faculty members who may serve as: a) degree program mentor/advisors, b) professors who collaborate with other faculty to teach for one or more semesters; or c) special topic presenters invited to share individual areas of expertise. Teaching team members facilitate an articulated curriculum that builds upon topics and processes previously experienced.

5. Electives, seminars, and practica foster individualization within a community of learners. Personal interests in the content areas taught may be explored through content electives that may include such areas as science, mathematics, language arts, art, and technology.

6. Exit outcomes reflect the linkage of theory to practice. Instead of a singular summative assessment and one capstone product, for example, the traditional comprehensive examination and thesis, exit assessment tools consist of a portfolio (a videotaped log of teaching samples, student case studies, curriculum and assessment action plans, community involvement artifacts), a final action

research project and paper, and a final reflective essay on professional development throughout the master's program.

7. Three strands reflect the NBPTS framework within a context of inquiry and reflection, initiated early in the program. Strand descriptions are summarized here:

**Inquiry:** Educational Research, Classroom-focused (3 cr.)

**Strand I Talent Development (total: 6 cr.)**

The first strand is based on the proposition that teachers are committed to their students and their learning. The courses early in the program provide the foundation and developmental theory necessary to recognize, value, and nurture unique talents of each child. Emphasis in this strand includes talent, intellectual, and socio-emotional development; meeting individual needs; and maximizing students' cognitive and affective capacities (Ishler, et al, 1995).

**Strand II Managing/Monitoring Student Learning (total: 16 cr.)**

This strand includes the key components of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Each course is followed by a seminar and practicum to facilitate the implementation and assessment of new practices. Six credits of content electives are also included in addition to the key component courses. Students wishing to earn a certification endorsement concurrent with the master's degree could elect courses that would meet the requirements for expanded certification, taking an extra course or two during the final summer or completing endorsement requirements the year after their cohort graduates (Ishler, et al, 1995).

**Strand III Community (total: 8 cr.)**

The strand begins with a focus on self as a developing master teacher and as a member of a cohort group. By the second summer, community concept develops sequentially through a focus on a) the community of family and teacher/parent relationships, b) the community of professionals within and outside of the schools, and c) the larger geo-political community, including access through electronic communication (Ishler, et al, 1995).

**Inquiry:** Final Research Seminar (2 cr.)

8. Time commitments are pre-established to assist in planning. Cohorts of students progress through the degree program in seven consecutive semester, for example, three summers and two intervening

academic years. Constructivism extends to scheduling: cohort members and teaching team members collaboratively come to consensus on when classes will be scheduled each semester.

9. Inquiry, reflection, and authentic assessment are crucial. From application to graduation, the overall program and each course within it follows a sequence of 1) pre-assessment, 2) theoretical knowledge expansion, 3) application of theory to practice, and 4) outcome assessment.

With the advent of funding for innovative professional development, a pilot cohort began the practitioners' master's program in summer, 1995. With an initial cohort in place, faculty members in the department housing the degree program wanted an idea of how well the developing program matched the needs of other practicing educators across the state. What factors, including the variables of grade level and years of experience, impact practitioner intent re: earning a master's degree? What components are desired in a master's program? In what additional professional development topics are practitioners interested?

## Methodology

A single-page questionnaire was designed to explore:

1) whether or not teachers had a master's degree,

2) factors that influence intent re: earning a master's degree,

3) components practitioners want in a master's program, and

4) additional professional development offerings desired.

A statewide study was subsequently conducted in fall of 1995 in five of UNI's professional development centers, reflecting a representative mix of urban, suburban, and rural schools. UNI center coordinators distributed 170 questionnaires, 30 plus 4 spare copies in each center, to random samples of teachers, stratified by grade level, within each center. Anonymous questionnaires were returned to center coordinators who returned them to the researcher at the second on-campus meeting in fall, 1995. Quantitative analysis was performed with the assistance of SPSS software.

## RESULTS

An even 100 surveys were brought back to campus, resulting in a return rate of 59%. Experience levels of respondents ranged from first year teachers to 46-year veterans, with a mean of 17 years of experience. Thirty-four percent taught in grades 7-12; sixty-six percent taught in grades PreK-6.

### Master's Degree Status

Exactly 50% had master's degrees, earned between 1961 and 1995, while the other 50% did not. Of the 50 teachers with a master's degree, 14 had earned their degrees at private colleges or universities and 36 had earned master's degrees at public universities. Most teachers with a master's (64%) had earned their degrees by the tenth year of their teaching careers, although as many earned their degrees between the 16th and 20th years of teaching as between the 1st and 5th years of service.

Intent to earn a master's degree was impacted the most by the years of experience possessed by respondents. Chi-square analysis indicated that the impact of years of experience upon intent to earn a master's degree was statistically significant at the .00001 level. The more years of experience, the greater the likelihood a teacher would respond negatively to the idea of earning a master's degree. The reverse was also true: the fewer their years of experience, the more likely teachers were to plan on a master's degree at some point in their careers (see Table 1).

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Insert Table 1 about here

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When considering grade level taught rather than years of experience as the dependent variable, more of the 7-12 teachers (70.6%) in the composite sample of 100 teachers had master's degrees than did the PreK-6 teachers (39.3%) who responded (see Table 2). Although more PreK-6 teachers than 7-12 teachers did not intend to earn a master's degree, it can be noted in Table 1 that the tendency to respond negatively increased according to years of experience and this variable, more so than grade level, may have accounted for observed responses. However, chi-square analysis of this sample did show the impact of grade level on intent to earn a master's degree to be significant at the .00923 level, with more 7-12 teachers than PreK-6 teachers possessing or expecting to get a master's degree.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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**Responses to Components of the PDMA Program**

All respondents, with or without a master's degree, found the same two components to be the most important: applicability to the classroom and programmatic design that emphasizes the needs of career teachers (see Tables 3 and 4). These top two components set a theme that resounds throughout the narrative responses.

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Insert Tables 3 and 4 about here

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The third-ranked component, grounding the program in a prescriptive application of NBPTS guidelines, disputes the occasional stereotype that practicing teachers are not interested in national professional standards. Although a greater number of teachers indicated they were neutral about this component than about the top two, a few noted in the margin that they, "wish we knew more about this" and, "when it makes a difference re: national licensure reciprocity the exam may be worth the time and expense".

Of the remaining components, teachers who possessed a master's assigned greater importance to the ability to keep working while earning a master's and to possessing at least two years of experience before beginning master's study. Teachers who did not have a master's degree looked more favorably upon the components of cohort groups and a pre-established time commitment of two academic years and three summers than did teachers with a master's degree, to whom these components may not have been available when they earned their degrees.

**Narrative Responses re: Desired Master's Program Components**

Teachers responding to the questionnaire were asked why they had or had not chosen to earn a master's degree. The top two responses among those who had earned a master's included the fact that classes had been convenient, in some cases offered on-site in their schools or school districts, and that they had desired personal professional development. Salary increase was mentioned but ranked sixth in the thematic analysis of responses and was never the first component mentioned when it was included in a narrative response (see Table 5).

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Insert Table 5 about here

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Among teachers who had not earned a master's degree, 17 cited family responsibilities and an additional 14 stated simply that they had no time or were too busy with the demands of teaching. Providing a similar rationale, four teachers mentioned that they had begun a master's degree but had "stopped out", left their degree programs with intent to return, because of unexpected personal or family responsibilities. The two respondents who had dropped out of master's programs stated that they did so because of departmental or campus politics (see Table 6).

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Insert Table 6 about here

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When teachers with master's degrees were asked what they would change about their degree programs and teachers without master's

degrees were asked what they would like to have included, top responses were remarkably similar (see Tables 7 and 8). All respondents echoed the theme of making master's degree programs more applicable to the classroom, calling for more practical experiences and practica, and dropping thesis requirements. Teachers with a master's did recognize the importance of inquiry in the classroom but suggested theses be replaced with a more action research oriented approach.

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Insert Tables 7 and 8 about here

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The last question on both sides of the questionnaire asked respondents what topics they would like as professional development offerings in their school or district. Although this component was intended for other purposes and categorized responses will not be discussed in this paper, it was interesting to note that 36 of the 50 respondents with a master's degree (72%) offered ideas and discussed hopes for their personal processes of professional development while only 14 of the respondents without a master's degree (28%) offered one or two word responses, many of which did not reflect current trends and issues in education when compared with the interests of teachers with a master's degree.

## DISCUSSION

Results of the study resulted in five main observations related to master's study for educators:

1. The overriding goal of a practitioner-oriented master's degree program must be to shape the knowledge base applied in practice. Schon (1990) calls this process reflection-in-action, an approach which Kowalski (1995) describes as the artistry of refining theoretical professional knowledge and skills to inform experiential practice.

This approach differs from the conventional epistemological perspective of higher education, which demands that the academic and the practical realms remain separate, and takes a stance akin to a political philosophical view, which advocates the development of knowledge to produce expertise that can be used to benefit society. The resulting perspective of knowledge drawn from answers to questions raised in a context-based inquiry process rather than content knowledge as an end in itself reflects a change in the philosophical foundations of higher education that are not presently supported by all members of the academy but are considered long overdue by many PreK-12 practitioners. Brubacher (1982) addresses this conflict by suggesting a perspective grounded in the American philosophy of pragmatism to combine the best of the traditional and the political through Dewey's philosophy of experimentalism which holds there is no knowledge without application and that knowledge cannot be preexistent to action but is the result of action - a philosophical basis congruent with practitioner-oriented master's degree programs.

The theme of teachers' responses throughout the questionnaire was that of the importance of making master's degree programs more applicable to the classroom. One teacher responded, "put more

emphasis on finding out the problems of classroom teachers and research to address those problems if you really want to facilitate a change in teachers' practice".

2. Theoretical constructs taught must be modeled and proactively connected to classroom practice. Transfer of theoretical constructs to classroom practice, becoming consciously skilled to the point of applying the process of reflection-in-action as an everyday analytical approach, can be best accomplished through practical, site-based experiences. The PDMA strands follow a progression of identifying student needs (pre-assessment), guided instruction which offers multiple directions and choices (theoretical knowledge expansion), practica (application of theory to practice), and seminars (reflective assessment and making further adjustments to practice). Professors model student-oriented delivery based on constructivist principles.

3. Degree programs are needed that recognize the specialty of classroom practice. Just as the field of family practice is rapidly becoming a recognized specialty in the field of medicine, the specialty of classroom practice is in need of recognition. Some teachers who had considered earning a master's degree noted that they were not sure what major to declare, having observed that most of their colleagues involved in master's study wanted to leave the classroom and move into education-related career specialties such as administrator, counselor, or curriculum coordinator. One teacher asked for, "a program that will better meet the needs of teachers who will continue to work with students".

As with any other master's program, a practitioners' master's

degree is not for every educator, nor are all components of UNI's fledgling PDMA considered important by educators in every circumstance (see Tables 3 and 4). For example, some teachers may want to extend a degree program over 4 or more years, (see Table 8) and may not want a degree offered within pre-determined time parameters. There will always be classroom teachers who desire to prepare for careers in specialty areas; such as administration, curriculum coordination, or counseling; that take them out of the classroom. We need experienced educators in those roles. We also need to recognize classroom practice as a specialty area and offer the option of programs that assist career educators in the process of becoming masters in the area of classroom teaching.

4. Degree programs need to be accessible and affordable for teachers in the initial years of their careers. This study indicates that by the time teachers reach the mid-point of their careers most lose motivation to get a master's degree. In the initial phases of a career, finances and the daily demands of teaching are significant factors. When family responsibilities and child care concerns are added to the mix, teachers easily become geographically bound and have even fewer resources of time and money to invest in graduate study. Teachers must see a clear connection of theoretical knowledge to the knowledge base of practice if they are to perceive an investment in master's study as worthwhile.

5. Master's study shapes expectations for personal processes of continuous professional development. As such, it is crucial to systemic change at the school or district levels. Building/district needs or improvement plans may also be integrated through community-

themed seminars and practica, integrating personal professional development with a comprehensive systemic change process (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992). One example from the study is that 72% of the teachers with a master's degree described topics they would like to see addressed in a professional development format while only 28% of the teachers without a master's degree offered responses in this area, most consisting of non-systemic "parachute drop" topics.

In conclusion, practitioners want master's degree programs that facilitate their personal professional development, are applicable to the classroom, and provide practical experiences/practica designed to make conscious connections of theory to classroom practice. Many contemporary educators need to engage in master's study while working, in order to maintain obligations to family. Classes in close proximity to teaching sites and schedules that allow for flexible program options facilitate systemic approaches to personal professional development.

The context of contemporary classrooms has increased the impetus for practicing educators to seek out master's programs that go beyond the process of accumulating thirty-some isolated credits in search of master's programs designed to reflect the way experienced adult practitioners internalize knowledge through the process of reflection-in-action. Sockett (1994) states that, "we have few examples of what professional development based on the importance of teacher autonomy would look like". The practitioners' master's degree program provides one glimpse of the possibilities that exist when context-focused graduate education facilitates the reflective transfer of educational theory to classroom practice.

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TABLE 1

Master's Survey: All Respondents (n=100)

Crosstabulation: Intent to Earn a Master's by Years of Experience

| Total | Intent Yes | Intent No | Have Master's | Row Totals |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0 - 10 yrs. | 22 | 2 | 8 | 32 |
| 11 - 20 yrs. | 11 | 4 | 10 | 25 |
| 21 - 30 yrs. | 3 | 8 | 27 | 38 |
| over 30 yrs. | 0 | 0 | 5 | 5 |
| Column Totals | 36 | 14 | 50 | 100 |

Chi-Square (Pearson) = 33.97901, 6df, significance level: .00001

TABLE 2

Master's Survey: All Respondents

Crosstabulation: Intent to Earn a Master's by Grade Taught

| Grade Taught | Intent Yes | Intent No | Have Master's | Row Totals |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| PreK - 6 | 30 | 10 | 26 | 66 |
| 7 - 12 | 6 | 4 | 24 | 34 |
| Column Totals | 36 | 14 | 50 | 100 |

Chi-Square (Pearson) = 9.37102, 2df, significance level: .00923

TABLE 3

Master's Survey: Respondents (n=50) with a Master's Degree

Crosstabulation: PDMA Components by Importance

| Components | Important | Neutral | Unimportant | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Applicable to the Classroom | 48 | 2 | 0 | |
| Designed for Career Tchrs | 40 | 8 | 2 | |
| Based on NBPTS Guidelines | 32 | 17 | 1 | |
| Two years' Experience Required to Admit | 31 | 15 | 4 | |
| Continued Employment in Teaching Required | 28 | 20 | 0 | ** |
| Clear Time Commitment: 2 School Yrs & 3 Summers | 20 | 25 | 4 | * |
| Progress thru Program with Cohort Group | 19 | 18 | 3 | |

* 1 survey was returned without a response to this component
** 2 surveys were returned without a response to this component

TABLE 4

Master's Survey: Respondents (n=50) without a Master's Degree

Crosstabulation: PDMA Components by Importance by Master's Status

| Components | Important | Neutral | Unimportant |
|---|---|---|---|
| Applicable to the Classroom | 48 | 2 | 0 |
| Designed for Career Tchrs | 41 | 7 | 2 |
| Based on NBPTS Guidelines | 34 | 15 | 1 |
| Clear Time Commitment: 2 School Yrs & 3 Summers | 27 | 22 | 1 |
| Progress thru Program with Cohort Group | 24 | 23 | 3 |
| Continued Employment in Teaching Required | 22 | 23 | 5 |
| Two years' Experience Required to Admit | 21 | 19 | 10 |

**TABLE 5**

Master's Survey: Respondents with a Master's Degree

Why Did You Obtain a Master's Degree?

| Component | Frequency | Rank |
|---|---|---|
| Convenient/on-site classes | 23 | 1.0 |
| Professional development | 11 | 2.0 |
| School's/program's reputation | 8 | 3.5 |
| Desired degree in specialized area | 8 | 3.5 |
| Cost: lower tuition, financial aid | 7 | 5.0 |
| To qualify for a salary increase | 6 | 6.0 |
| Expand career opportunities | 5 | 7.0 |
| Scheduled evenings, weekends, summer | 3 | 8.0 |
| Program designed to support teachers | 2 | 9.5 |
| School district helped pay costs | 2 | 9.5 |
| Needed a post-bacc traditional MAT | 1 | 11.0 |

(Thematic analysis of narrative responses; will not total 100%)

TABLE 6

Master's Survey: Respondents without a Master's Degree

Why Have You Not Obtained a Master's Degree?

| Component | Frequency | Rank |
|---|---|---|
| Family responsibilities | 17 | 1.0 |
| No time: too busy | 14 | 2.0 |
| No quality in driving distance | 4 | 3.5 |
| Started, stopped out | 4 | 3.5 |
| Programs irrelevant to practice | 3 | 5.5 |
| No interest | 3 | 5.5 |
| Started, left: dept politics | 2 | 8.0 |
| No evening child care available | 2 | 8.0 |
| Self-perception: too old | 2 | 8.0 |
| Wanted to wait till settled in a school system | 1 | 10.0 |

(Thematic analysis of narrative responses; will not total 100%)

TABLE 7

Master's Survey: Respondents with a Master's Degree

What Would You Emphasize/Change/Add Re: Your Degree Program?

| Component | Frequency | Rank |
|---|---|---|
| Make it more applicable to classroom | 17 | 1.0 |
| More practical experiences or practica | 8 | 2.0 |
| Replace thesis with action research | 6 | 3.0 |
| Include technology and applications | 5 | 4.0 |
| Apply theory to practice | 4 | 5.0 |
| More up-to-date professors | 3 | 6.5 |
| Not all classes with same professor | 3 | 6.5 |
| Some choices/electives* | 2 | 8.5 |
| Profs that practice what they preach | 2 | 8.5 |
| Flexibility in scheduling | 1 | 10.5 |
| Ban "busy work" assignments | 1 | 10.5 |

* These respondents indicated they had room for no electives in their master's program: entire degree program was prescribed.

(Thematic analysis of narrative responses; will not total 100%)

TABLE 8

Master's Survey: Respondents without a Master's Degree

What Would You Like to See Included in a Master's Program?

| Components | Frequency | Rank |
|---|---|---|
| Make it more applicable to classroom | 11 | 1.0 |
| Convenient/on-site classes | 4 | 2.0 |
| Drop the thesis requirement | 5 | 3.0 |
| More practical experiences or practica | 3 | 4.5 |
| Pre-plan the course schedule | 3 | 4.5 |
| Lower the cost | 2 | 7.5 |
| Allow credits transferred in | 2 | 7.5 |
| Spread program over 4-5 years | 2 | 7.5 |
| Allow for some choices/electives | 2 | 7.5 |
| Substitute NBPTS exam for thesis | 1 | 11.0 |
| More up-to-date professors | 1 | 11.0 |
| Profs that practice what they preach | | 11.0 |

(Based on thematic analysis of narrative responses, will not total 100%)



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